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The Use of Cartoon Characters in Extremist Internet Discourse as a 'Soft Impact' Technology

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Abstract. The article examines how cartoon characters are used in extremist Internet discourse according to soft impact technology. Main traits of the extremist internet discourse and its cognitive technologies of influence are reviewed. The role of cartoon characters as a tool of soft impact with the aim to contribute to the formation of extremist attitude is analyzed.

Keywords: Internet Discourse, Soft Impact, Cognitive technologies

1. Introduction

The Internet is a very complex communication space, where there is a lot of content aimed at provoking users to various actions. It has been noted

more than once that by means of modular flashes of information [Toffler, 2002] — commands, theories, news snippets truncated and charged with certain emotions, going beyond the boundaries of mental cells — mass communication forms in consciousness images through which one or another object is perceived or assumed. It is this collective image that acts as the 'trigger' that brings to life certain thoughts accompanying images and reactions. As a result, information that carries a certain 'charge' affects and stimulates the emotional sphere of a person, causes associative connections that provoke certain states and corresponding reactions. All this makes it a tool for manipulating consciousness aimed at shaping public opinion and behaviour, which allows stakeholders to use it to achieve their goals. Therefore, disinformation is used, manifested in the dissemination of distorted and contradictory information, as well as rumours, the formation of illusions; the creation of an information blockade due to the non-admission of a certain part of information into the open information environment, which contributes to the emergence of a one-sided view of the event in the consumer, perceived as the only true one, etc. All these methods of psychological influence are fully reflected in the information space of the Internet.

The presence of such content on the Internet is a source of risks for the socialisation of young people. At the present stage of development of the information society, it is the Internet that becomes the source and medium of socialization of the individual throughout their life. At the same time, socialization on the Internet is characterised by a number of specific features. So, T. V. Efimova [Efimova, 2011] notes the indirect nature of agents' influence on socialisation; in the Internet space, the latter is mainly spontaneous; Internet communications limit traditional forms of socialization (communication, game, learning, etc.); a person in the Internet space begins to assimilate norms, goals, values and rules adopted not by a specific society in which they live, but by that network community where norms and values not having strong historical and cultural roots dominate. Despite these risks of the information space, a person still lives in it, builds communications and relationships in accordance with its rules, thereby forming a special discourse — the Internet discourse.

2. Specificity of the extremist Internet discourse

The totality of sociolinguistic components of one space makes it possible to speak about the development of a new type of discourse: the Inter-

net discourse that functions directly in the virtual environment itself and uses its electronic channels to transmit a message from the communicator to the communicant. In this regard, 'the Internet discourse is a process of creating a text in combination with pragmatic, sociocultural, psychological factors, and a purposeful social action including the interaction of people' [Zagoruiko, 2012, 59]. As noted by Vinogradova, the specificity of the Internet discourse lies primarily in the peculiarities of communication via the Internet and the reasons for referring to it as a communication channel [Vinogradova, 2004, 63]. The features are understood as follows:

1. Anonymity. Despite the fact that sometimes you can get some information of a personal nature and even a photo of the interlocutor, they are not enough for a real and adequate perception of the person. Due to such anonymity and impunity, another feature associated with a decrease in psychological and social risk in the process of communication is manifested in the network — affective emancipation, abnormality and some irresponsibility of participants in communication. A person in the network can and does show great freedom of speech and action (up to insults, obscene language, sexual harassment), since the risk of exposure and personal negative assessment by others is minimal.

2. The originality of the processes of interpersonal perception in the absence of non-verbal information. As a rule, the mechanisms of stereotyping and identification have a strong influence on the idea of the interlocutor, as well as the attitude towards the expectation of the desired qualities in the partner.

3. Voluntary and desirable contacts. The user voluntarily makes contacts or leaves them, and can also interrupt them at any time.

4. Difficulty of the emotional component of communication, at the same time, a persistent desire for emotional content of the text, which is expressed in the creation of special icons to indicate emotions or in the description of emotions in words (in brackets after the main text of the message).

5. Striving for atypical, abnormal behaviour. Often, users present themselves from a different side, different from the real social norms or play roles that are not realized in activities outside the network or scenarios of abnormal behaviour [Zagoruiko, 2012, 59].

Thus, the Internet discourse becomes a platform for the development of other discourses. The Internet can be considered a polydiscursive space; penetration into its sphere and the active dissemination of dangerous dis-

courses in it, for example, such as an extremist discourse, are becoming especially relevant.

Moving on to comprehending the concept of ‘the extremist Internet discourse’, it is worthwhile to immediately clarify that today there is no single definition of it, like the term ‘extremism’. A number of researchers (Salimovsky V.A., Mishlanov V.A., Ermakova L.M.) note that the extremist discourse is ‘a part of the discourse of hostility — a practice represented by statements and texts that have signs of illegal (extremist) acts’ [Salimovsky, Ermakova, 2011, 72]. According to the amendments to No. 114-FZ On Countering the Extremist Activity dated April 29, 2008, the extremist activity (extremism) includes:

- forcible change of the foundations of the constitutional system and violation of the integrity of the Russian Federation;
- public justification of terrorism and other terrorist activities;
- incitement of social, racial, national or religious hatred;
- propaganda of the exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of a person on the basis of his social, racial, national, religious or linguistic affiliation or attitude to religion;
- violation of the rights, freedoms and legal interests of a person and a citizen, depending on his social, racial, national, religious or linguistic affiliation or attitude to religion;
- obstruction of the exercise by citizens of their electoral rights and the right to participate in a referendum or violation of the secrecy of voting combined with violence or the threat of its use;
- obstruction of the lawful activities of state bodies, local self-government bodies, election commissions, public and religious associations or other organizations, combined with violence or the threat of its use;
- commission of crimes based on the reasons specified in Paragraph ‘e’ of Part 1 of Article 63 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation;
- propaganda and public display of Nazi paraphernalia or symbols, or paraphernalia or symbols similar to Nazi paraphernalia or symbols to the point of confusion (swastika);
- public calls for the implementation of these acts or the mass distribution of knowingly extremist materials, as well as their production or storage for the purpose of mass distribution;
- a public, knowingly false accusation by a person holding an official government position of the Russian Federation or an official government

position of a constituent entity of the Russian Federation of committing, during the performance of his official duties, of the acts specified in this article and constituting a crime;

- organisation and preparation of these acts, as well as incitement to their implementation;

- financing of these acts or other assistance in their organisation, preparation and implementation, including through the provision of educational, printing and material and technical base, telephone and other types of communication or the provision of information services [Federal Law No. 114-FZ, 2002].

We find a more detailed interpretation of the term under study in L. V. Korosteleva's works, where extremist discourse is understood as 'public ideologically motivated statements of socio-political and/or religious content, addressed to a potential like-minded person and focused on psychological influence by means of language; their goal is the formation of extremist ideological attitudes, the propaganda of social violence and calls for aggressive actions against the government or a certain part of society' [Korosteleva, 2017: 46].

Thus, these definitions of the extremist discourse are based on public statements and texts containing signs of an extremist action in relation to an object (government or part of society). Following V. A. Mishlanov and V. A. Salimovsky, we will consider the extremist discourse as a part of the discourse of hostility, which is 'the hostile attitude of people towards others and/or, in accordance with their goal setting, containing obviously unfair assessments, offensive statements, etc. and therefore naturally causes enmity' [Mishlanov, Salimovsky, 2006]. As for the 'the extremist Internet discourse', we will understand all of the above, only with a small addition related to its implementation in a virtual environment, which creates certain conditions for the transition of communication to a new level, departing from the usual forms and methods of its implementation.

3. Cognitive technologies for influencing the audience

The activities of extremist groups not only today, but have always been aimed primarily at adolescents and young people. Manipulators carry out their work with this group through 'indirect actions' in the network space, which makes it possible to gently immerse the individual, with their network behaviour and individual personality characteristics in mind, into a new,

modelled reality through language patterns, transformation of meanings and terms, correctly selected communicative strategies and tactics, symbolism, metaphors, attributes, the creation of certain socio-cultural codes, smart forms, etc. As a result, firstly, thanks to various voluntary-playing methods, the representatives of the risk group, that is, young people, change / substitute social roles, statuses, positions, and also there is a transformation of the content of historical memory, which adversely affects the socialisation of this group in society. Secondly, network technologies are able to create and immerse people in virtual reality, provoke the same emotions, thoughts, actions in different people that are beneficial to those who control mass communications, which leads to the fact that a huge number of people who were previously unfamiliar with each other, who did not have any opportunity to intersect in ordinary life, suddenly become 'hostages' of one emotion, thought, idea and turn into a single whole capable of actions, sometimes contrary to the letter of the law. The reason for this is the cognitive and information technologies on reformatting the existing reality (known as NBIC convergence), actively used by manipulators in the global information platform which make it possible to purposefully form goals, values and behavior motivations in a given format — for individuals and small and large social groups — in the customers' interests and, above all, outside the control of the state.

This concept is most often viewed as the basis of social progress capable of improving a person's capabilities on the basis of their self-development, because cognitive technologies are ways of transforming human properties and qualities of human behavior by either modifying the psycho-physiological parameters of the body, or including a person in hybrid (human machine) systems. Today, there is even a separate area — cognitive technologies that change the social behavior of humans and human communities. This is what contributed to the fact that NBIC-technologies have played an important role in the development of criminal acts associated with political upheavals at the beginning of the 21st century, in the so-called 'colour revolutions'.

4. Research results and discussion

One such cognitive technology of 'soft impact' on the target Internet audience within the framework of extremist Internet discourse can be considered the use of cartoon characters in conflictogenic polycode texts. As the analysis of the sample in conflict-prone polycode texts shows, characters of ani-

mated films are often represented as the characters depicted in a picture. At the same time, when considering the specifics of this corpus of polycode texts, a number of regularities are observed. First of all, it should be noted that the character dataset is very specific and stereotyped. One of their main features is popularity and recognition. According to the results of the analysis, donor spheres are certain cartoons, which differ in time and place of creation. In accordance with this criterion, the following groups can be distinguished: Soviet (Russian) cartoons and American cartoons. It is noteworthy that, despite its popularity, the sample contains practically no characters from Japanese cartoons made in the anime genre, as well as modern characters. Domestic cartoons, which are donor spheres, include 'Holidays in Prostokvashino', 'Winnie the Pooh', 'Well, just a Minute!', 'The Scarlet Flower', 'Geese and Swans', 'Vovka in the Distant Kingdom', 'Twelve Months', 'The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Bogatyrs', 'The Return of the Prodigal Parrot', 'Ded Moroz and the Grey Wolf', 'Umka', 'Mom for a Mammoth Baby', 'Junior and Carlson', 'Beware, Monkeys!' and others. The Russian films that appeared after 2000 include full-length animated films about the adventures of Russian heroes 'Alyosha Popovich and Tugarin the Serpent', 'Ilya Muromets and Nightingale the Robber', 'Three Heroes on Distant Shores', 'Prince Vladimir'. American cartoons include 'My Little Pony: Friendship is a Miracle' and others. The most numerous group is made up of characters from Soviet cartoons; one of the reasons for using these images from these films is seen in their 'pragmatic potential of impact' on different target age groups. At the same time, if the characters from Soviet cartoons are familiar to representatives of absolutely all ages, then the characters of modern American cartoons are no less popular among young people. As a rule, in polycode texts, only certain heroes are used — positive and negative characters (antiheroes) — while the author prefers the images of 'the goodies', on whose behalf they broadcast their attitudes.

It is worth noting that the above points to a very specific tactic of influence, implemented through this group of polycode texts, which consists in masking the transmitted ideas in remarks attributed to positive (beloved by all) heroes familiar from childhood, who were empathized and learned, due to which the content of the message bypasses the barrier of critical perception. In this regard, a purposeful transformation of the original image of the character also takes place. The hero is credited with thoughts and remarks with content unusual for a given character, traits of his character

can be distorted, atypical attributes and details can be added to the external appearance, they can be placed into an unusual and unnatural context of the situation for them, while positive characters begin to acquire the features of negative heroes.

The results of the analysis also show that, as in the case of other polycode texts of a conflict-generating orientation, the images presented in the picture are intended to represent one of the poles in the 'friend-foe' dichotomy. At the same time, the author of a polycode text can broadcast his/her thoughts on behalf of the image, which s/he refers both to the pole of 'his/her' and 'someone else's' (in the latter case, deliberately ridiculing or showing their inconsistency). In this regard, we note that in the polycode texts under consideration, characters are presented that are attributed by the author to both the 'own' and 'alien' poles, where the latter represent the social camp of imaginary opponents. It is noteworthy that the cartoon characters, on behalf of whom the author broadcasts his/her messages, for the most part belong to the 'own' pole, which reflects the general trend characteristic of conflicting polycode texts in this aspect. Attention is drawn to the fact that the author refers to the pole of "his/her" precisely positive characters.

In this connection, the context depicted in the picture seems to be significant, so a character can perform a certain set of actions, or s/he can simply be present. The nature of these actions can be as follows: speaking, using violence against 'strangers', broadcasting the algorithm of behavior. Thus, the specificity of these actions is also unusual for the behavior of these characters in cartoons, which also indicates the transformation of the original image.

An important aspect in this regard is understanding the reasons for using these specific images and answering the question of why it is used in this context, what is the correlation between the image used and the content of the broadcast message. In this case, the choice of a specific character may be due to:

- the personal qualities of the character;
- features of his/her typical behavior;
- the similarity of the situation in which he found him/herself;
- secondary data that relate to the character, but are not significant for the disclosure of his/her image.

The connection with the character in this case is expressed indirectly. So, for example, in the polycode text 'The Jews have never loved my surname' this phrase is a replica uttered by Postman Pechkin, a character from the cartoon 'Uncle Fyodor, the Dog and the Cat'.

In this case, the choice of this character is in no way connected with the peculiarities of his image, but is conditioned only by the motivation of his surname, which is formed from the word 'pechka' ('oven'). At the same time, the essence of the message refers readers to the facts of the historical past. If Postman Pechkin had any other surname, the choice of this character for this text would not make sense.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the danger of such technologies of 'soft impact' lies in the fact that, like other cognitive technologies used in the extremist discourse, they affect stable personality structures (value orientations), operational motivations of a person, contribute to the formation of extremist attitudes and provide an opportunity to program the audience for certain radical actions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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